

## **What is causing the skin lesions in walruses?**

The primary disease agent has not yet been identified. Sampled tissues have so far tested negative for the more common seal illness. Laboratory testing continues for bacterial, viral, fungal, or toxic agents which may be responsible for the condition.

## **How many walruses have skin lesions?**

Observations at a haulout near Point Lay, Alaska this fall indicated that approximately 6% of the walruses in the herd had unusual skin lesions. Russian scientists have also reported small numbers of walruses with similar skin conditions at coastal haulout in Russia. The lesions appear to be most prevalent in younger age classes of animals.

## **Is the disease fatal to walrus?**

We don't really know. Many of the carcasses examined to date with skin lesions also appeared to have suffered from trampling injuries at the haulout site. It is possible that two or more factors may be linked – sick or unhealthy animals may be more susceptible to other sources of mortality. The occurrence of healed lesions among live animals that were otherwise healthy in appearance also suggests that the condition is not necessarily lethal.

## **Why is walrus part of this Unusual Mortality Event (UME)?**

Although relatively few sick or dead walruses have been reported to date, affected animals have symptoms which are similar to those observed in sick and dying ringed seals in the region. Walruses are included in the investigation to determine whether there is a common disease agent affecting multiple species in the region.

## **What are the next steps in the investigation now that an UME has been declared?**

As part of the UME investigation process, The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Working Group to develop an appropriate response strategy. Sample collection will be coordinated with the standing network members and subsistence user groups in Alaska as well as our colleagues in the Russian Federation.

## **What does the UME mean for the status of Pacific walrus under the Endangered Species Act?**

Walrus were added to the list of candidate species under the Act in February 2011 with a listing priority number of 9. We will evaluate how disease affects the status of walrus when we conduct the annual candidate notice of review in 2012.